

Lawn Disease Control

“What’s wrong with my lawn? Suddenly, it’s full of dead, brown patches.” Many homeowners share this common refrain in the last few weeks, as our lawns fall victim to fungal diseases such as dollar spot and brown patch. Warm, damp nights that result in high humidity levels around the grass canopy for long periods of time are optimal for the growth of fungal spores, and have led to very high disease pressure for home lawns in the last few weeks.

Dollar spot and brown patch are two common fungal diseases of turfgrass. Turfgrasses such as bluegrass, tall fescue, perennial rye and zoysiagrass are susceptible to both diseases. Dollar spot gets its common name from the size of the affected spots of grass in the lawn. Usually the first spots will be about the size of a silver dollar. Large leaf spots or lesions develop across the entire width of the leaf blade and are light tan or whitish with a medium reddish-brown border. Dollar spot lesions are also typically 'pinched in' at the middle of the lesions giving an hourglass effect. Infected leaf blades eventually die leading to quarter or silver dollar sized dead spots in the lawn.

Symptoms of brown patch start with scattered dead grass blades forming a circle or semi-circular pattern in the lawn. The circles of affected grass may be up to 2 feet in diameter, although they can be smaller as well. From a distance, the turf has a brownish cast rather than large dead sections. Close examination of the leaves shows long, irregular leaf spots that are light tan or whitish in color. The margins of leaf spots are dark brown or purplish-black. Grass in the center of the circles may not show any disease symptoms at all.

Control lawn leaf diseases using the following techniques.

1. Provide lawns with adequate fertilizer to maintain a moderate growth rate throughout the growing season. Lawns with low fertility are more commonly associated with severe dollar spot damage.
2. Keep mowing and other activities to a minimum when the grass is wet to prevent further spread of fungal spores.
3. Apply a systemic fungicide, such as Banner (propiconazol) or Bayleton (triadimefon) to protect un-infected plants and slow disease spread. Both dollar spot and brown patch kill grass leaf blades, but seldom kill entire plants. Over the next several weeks, temperatures and humidity levels will drop, making conditions less favorable for infection and reducing disease pressure. At the same time, fungicide protected plants will put out new leaf growth and recover from the damage.
4. Severely damaged lawns should be overseeded in September with disease resistant cultivars for long-term control; contact the UNL Extension office